CHAPTER XVII

ASSIMILATION AND ITS EFFECTS

(1) NATURE OF ASSIMILATION

THE most important process in the social life of the Jews since the eighteenth century has been the weakening of their ethnic homogeneity and of their sense of unity, and their assimilation to the economic and cultural life of their non-Jewish surroundings. Assimilation advanced with the changes which occurred in the economic life of the European nations. The system of guilds was replaced by one of free competition, which reproduced certain features of Jewish economy—the Jew ceased to be an alien in the economic system of the country and entered it as a full member. This was followed by the legal emancipation of the Jews, and this in turn by a breakdown of their cultural isolation. They renounced the Jewish tradition, which had been handed on from generation to generation by Jewish parents and the Jewish schools. Each subsequent generation increasingly tended to assume the traditions of its non-Jewish surroundings and to take them for the rule of its own actions. They adopted the vernacular and thereby gained access to its literature. Breaches appeared in

the fivefold wall of isolation—consisting of a separate economy, legal status, language, education, and religion—which, crumbled or even collapsed. The process started in Western and Central much earlier than in Eastern Europe, where its effects are therefore less apparent. But nowhere did the Jews remain altogether unaffected by assimilation; even in Oriental countries traces are by now visible. Assimilation is no new phenomenon in Jewish history. It